

Wilmington to acquire land on South Island

City collaborated with Openlands, received Department of Natural Resources grant

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WILMINGTON – The city of Wilmington appears to be moving closer to its vision for South Island along the Kankakee River. The Wilmington City Council voted Feb. 7 to finalize the acquisition of land on the island, which is connected to downtown Wilmington through Route 66.

By working with Openlands, an accredited land trust, Wilmington was able to access grant funding from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to buy lots at the entry area to South Island Park off Route 66. Openlands bought the lots in 2012 for \$505,000. The city will reimburse Openlands \$280,000.

Now, everything will come full circle as Wilmington reimburses Openlands and the city takes the title of the property, City Administrator Frank Koehler said. It's a project the city has been working on for years.

"It's part of an effort to begin some improvements to South Island," Koehler said, adding that nothing specific is planned yet as the most recent site plan for the island was completed in 2013.

Old houses that were on the acquired land were taken down by the city. Koehler said the city is working with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning on a downtown study to look at the area and how the downtown can interact with the nearby island more cohesively.

"The effort to build onto and utilize a natural attraction like the Kankakee River, which was designated as a National Water Trail last year, will draw tourists, support local businesses and leverage Wilmington's uniqueness in the region," Mayor Marty Orr said in a news release.

According to Openlands, owning the land now gives Wilmington flexibility and control in shaping the future of the site, and plans include developing a marquis gateway.

"Openlands is pleased to partner with Wilmington on this opportunity to advance open space and economic development goals," Openlands Vice President of Conservation Emy Brawley said. "The city's plan to increase open space and public use options on the island is good planning at its best."

Founded in 1963, Openlands is one of the nation's oldest and most successful metropolitan conservation organizations, having helped secure, protect and provide public access to more than 55,000 acres of land for parks, forest preserves, wildlife refuges, land and water greenway corridors, and urban gardens.